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Book review: John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi, In the Interest of Others: Organizations and Social Activism

Abstract

As the poet John Donne famously meditated in 1624, and Ernest Hemingway echoed in 1940, "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent." John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi are interested in this sense of human and social ecology, and investigate it via a comparative study of the memberships, structures, and politics of a target group of American and Australian trade unions.

Keywords

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REVIEW: John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi, *In the Interest of Others: Organizations and Social Activism*, (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013). pp. 315. Paper.

As poet John Donne famously meditated in 1624, and novelist Ernest Hemingway echoed in 1940, “No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent...”. John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi are also interested in this sense of human and social ecology, and investigate it via a comparative study of the memberships, structures, and politics of a target group of American and Australian trade unions.

Authors Ahlquist and Levi are political scientists. This study, more than a decade in the making, is an interdisciplinary investigation spanning industrial relations, business studies, politics, sociology, labour history, laced with a solid dose of specialist statistical data analysis. That said, the study relies significantly on historical sources and methodologies. The aim of the study is to explain why some trade unions work beyond the parameters of their memberships and attendant principles of self-interest, for the welfare and interest of others and for ‘a greater good’.

The unions studied are four in the transport industries, each with the capacity of use industrial action that disrupts national and international supply chains: in the United States, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), the International Longshore Union (ILA), and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU); in Australia, the Waterside Workers’ Federation (WWF), which amalgamated in 1993 with the Seamen’s Union of Australia to form the Maritime Union of Australia. The IBT and the ILA are unions which, during the seventy-plus year time span covered by the study from the 1930s onwards, encouraged members to follow the path self-interest. The ILWU and the WWF, on the other hand, historically encouraged members to take industrial action on social and political issues and causes, both national and international in scope, “far from the direct interests of union members”.

The study’s authors state they had “extraordinary access to people, archives, and information” regarding the ILWU; internal referencing and the Bibliography indicate similar access and familiarity with Australian archival materials, and access to insiders in the unionised sectors of the Australian maritime industry. Levi was Foundational Chair in Politics at the University of Sydney’s United States Studies Centre.

For labour movement scholars and participants, key findings of Ahlquist and Levi concern governance: union leaders who successfully deliver improved material conditions for their memberships, and who are adept at solving key problems for their memberships, have the

capacity to persuade/convince their memberships to take actions outside the immediate self-interested economist concerns of trade unionism.

However, delivering material benefits is not the sole or determining factor. As Ahlquist and Levi demonstrate with their analyses of the IBT and ILA, focus on membership self-interest and the delivery of material benefits can lead to the advancement of the personal power and wealth of union leaderships, notably seen during the governance (1957-71) of the late Jimmy Hoffer in the IBT; and in the ILA, the creation of salary structures that as late as 2010 continued to place its leaders amongst the highest paid union officials in the USA.

While trade union leaders might have the ideological commitment and desire to become involved in wider political and social issues beyond economism, Ahlquist and Levi demonstrate that this is not enough. To engage beyond 'self-interest', leaders require widespread membership support, and this has to be worked for and generated by union governance institutions and practices. There needs to be genuine attempts at creating democracy within the union, and transparency; memberships need to feel and experience the sense/actuality of participation. The provision and availability of education and information resources is important. It helps too if there are structures in place that promote and facilitate leaderships that come through the ranks. When it comes to union leaderships, it also helps if there is the pragmatism to understand what battles and issues to engage with outside of the union, and just how far to go. This pragmatism/understanding is not only a personal matter regarding individual leadership qualities, but also involves governance structures and practices that help leaderships relate to and understand their memberships.

In the Interest of Others is tightly argued, and not a uniformly easy read. I found its use of statistical analysis heavy going. However, I recognise the worth of this study, and recommend it as an essential part of any trade union programme preparing people for leadership roles. The authors envisage a wider purpose for their study beyond the labour movement, legitimately suggesting its relevance to organisations generally, and to governments, which seek "to generate polities in which more of their constituents will act in the interests of others".

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